

Facing Illegal Immigration - April, 2008

By Congressman Mike Castle

Illegal immigration is a problem in varying ways that many Americans may never notice. Defending our borders is not only done by building physical structures but also by enacting laws and procedures to prevent terrorists and dangerous criminals from entering our country illegally. Other legitimate concerns include the financial impact that illegal immigration has on many American communities. In a time when Americans are having their homes foreclosed upon and struggle to pay medical bills, it is vital that we take steps to improve the effectiveness of our immigration system and prevent waste in our public assistance programs.

The United States is a country founded by immigrants, and part of our strength as a nation is that we embrace persons of all backgrounds and cultures. In fact, every week my Congressional office works to unite individuals and their families through a legal admission or residency process. Unfortunately, those who follow the legal immigration procedures bear undue burdens because of the tens of thousands of individuals who cross into our country illegally every year. The Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics recently estimated that there are at least 11.6 million unauthorized persons in the U.S.; this number is up from 8.5 million in January 2000.

While the vast majority of illegal aliens are peaceful people who come here to find work, this massive flow makes us vulnerable to a security breach and often drains state and local resources. For this reason, I support strong border security measures, such as biometric tracking systems and tamper-resistant Social Security cards, passports, and drivers' licenses to prevent terrorists from gaining access to our critical infrastructure. An important bill that I believe should be a priority for Congress is known as the SAVE Act. This legislation would increase the number of U.S. border patrol agents and allow the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency to work with state and local governments to uphold the law. It would also take steps to improve employee verification systems, such as E-Verify, which is a free, voluntary program that allows businesses to verify electronically their newly hired employees' legal authorization to work in the U.S. Although more attention is necessary to improve the effectiveness of E-Verify, I am hopeful that technologies like this will eventually assist employers in hiring the workers they need and complying with the law.

The first step to addressing the individuals who are here illegally is to focus on those who have committed crimes and are under final deportation orders. Shockingly, of the thousands of criminal aliens who have served time in U.S. jails and prisons, more than 18,000 have been released back onto our streets because their home countries refused to take them back. As of February 2008, eight countries - including Laos, Iran, Eritrea, Vietnam, Jamaica, China, India, and Ethiopia - refuse to repatriate a total of 139,000 aliens. In one case, the federal government paid \$197,680 to fly an illegal alien convicted of assault back to his home country of Somalia - only to be denied entrance and ultimately released in the U.S. This is unacceptable, and in response, I have joined with Senator Arlen Specter and Congressman Charles Dent, both of Pennsylvania, in developing legislation to sanction countries that refuse to repatriate criminal aliens.

I believe my legislation, combined with efforts to expand border security and target fraudulent identification documents, can improve security and provide smarter use of taxpayer dollars. As Congress enters a busy spring session, I am dedicated to fighting on behalf of all Delawareans to pass these important provisions and send them to the President's desk at the earliest date possible.